

Why Easter spells disaster for Yellow-eared Parrots

The Yellow-eared Parrot *Ognorhynchus icterotis* (Critically Endangered) was once abundant across the High Andes of Colombia and Ecuador. However, by the late 1990s it was feared extinct until *Proyecto Ognorhynchus* rediscovered a small population in central Colombia (see *World Birdwatch* 22(1): 17–21). Thanks to their efforts, working with the local community, this population has steadily increased, from 81 birds in 1999 to approximately 130 birds today.

In January 2001, a second population of 277 birds was found in western Colombia, a considerable extension of their known range (see *World Birdwatch* 23(3): 7). *Proyecto Ognorhynchus* immediately sent in a research and conservation team, funded by Loro Parque Foundation and working with CorAntioquia (a regional environment agency). It soon became clear that the population was severely threatened because the wax palms *Ceroxylon* spp., on which the parrots are totally dependent, were being felled at an alarming rate. The wax palm, Colombia's national tree, is Critically



Yellow-eared Parrots *Ognorhynchus icterotis*

Endangered and grows extremely slowly. Mature trees may be more than 500 years old. Each year, during the religious festival of Easter, Palm Sunday is popularly celebrated around the world with palm frond-waving parades. Unfortunately, in most towns in the Colombian Andes, wax

palms are the fronds of choice for this procession. Ahead of Palm Sunday, CorAntioquia approached the local priest to ask him to encourage his congregation to use alternatives, such as the far commoner *Wettinia* palm. Despite this, on Palm Sunday roughly 400 villagers, and even some police, who had been advised of the palm's legally protected status, were carrying wax palm fronds. This equates to the destruction of roughly 100 trees. *Proyecto Ognorhynchus* is now intensifying environmental awareness and conservation activities with local communities to avoid a repeat of this needless destruction, and in October, more than 200 members of the community participated in a World Birdwatch day event at the site.

Ironically, Palm Sunday parades in the area where Yellow-eared Parrots were first rediscovered do not pose a threat; FARC guerrillas are active there, and do not permit the felling of live palms.

For more information on *Proyecto Ognorhynchus*, please visit www.ognorhynchus.com

Caught on camera: Lammergeier cainism



The Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus* is also known as the Bearded Vulture, because of the tuft of feathers at the base of its bill

For the first time, a team of Spanish scientists has documented sibling aggression, followed by the death of the younger chick (cainism) and the subsequent use of its remains to feed its

elder sibling (cannibalism) in the Lammergeier *Gypaetus barbatus*. Their study is part of a programme developed by the Spanish Ministry of Environment to find out the causes of the current reduction in productivity by the otherwise growing population of Lammergeiers in the Pyrenees. By placing video cameras inside a nest, the scientists were able to document a full breeding cycle in which two chicks were hatched. Only the six-day older chick fledged, after a four-month stay in the nest. Its

younger sibling died of starvation when four days old, after receiving pecks and being kept away from food by the older chick. On the fifth day, the surviving chick was fed the remains of its younger sibling.

The study sheds new light on the conservation of this unique and poorly-known species which is scarce and threatened with extinction in Europe. It raises the possibility of taking second chicks from nests in the wild (where they act as a reserve in case the first egg fails to hatch) and saving them for conservation purposes (captive breeding, population stocking, reintroductions, etc.). It has also revealed essential information on chick diet and other aspects of the breeding biology which is applicable to current conservation work on the species. The authors of the study, A Margalida, J Boudet, R Heredia and J Bertran, will conduct further research in the next breeding season. This will entail finding new nests as Lammergeiers – when successful – choose a different eyrie each year.

A remote digital camera allows researchers to watch the nesting birds on a laptop computer

